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Eros and education[1]

John Crutchfield

This essay explores the – admittedly taboo – theme of eros as it relates to education. While eros is generally understood today in the restricted sense of sexual desire (hence the taboo), there are good reasons to expand the concept to include the full range of embodied human experiences of attraction or sensuous affinity. Such experiences are not merely physiological, but also infused with emotion and imagination, and they constitute an indelible aspect of presence. While traditional education aims more or less explicitly at suppressing the erotic dimension of presence, performative approaches – precisely because they are rooted in the body – in effect open this dimension and make it available as an area of experience, a source of knowledge, and a motivation for learning. But this introduces an element of unpredictability, even volatility; and given the complex and often unconscious movement of eros, we are never far from the zones of social taboo and therefore of ethical concern. Proponents of a performative teaching and learning culture must therefore give careful thought to the question of how to approach the erotic aspect of presence honestly, ethically, and in ways that not only promote learning but also foster self-esteem and respect.

1 Love at first sound

Not often, but occasionally we meet someone in life who seems to be *fully present* in their work. Whatever that work may be, it is pursued like a 'calling' – a 'vocation' in the religious sense – passionately and without reservation. When self-doubts, fears, even rage and despair arise in counterpoint to the joys, they do so not as simple negations but as deeper expressions of commitment, as evidence, in other words, that the *whole human being* is in play. Such people not only do good work, but they keep doing it, they grow as human beings though their work, and their work grows with them. They are, in a word, craftspeople. In some profound way, they have said *Yes* to their chosen work, and hence to life.

This state of affairs may sound familiar to anyone who has ever been in love. And in fact, if you ask such fortunate people about their work, they will often resort to the familiar tropes Roland Barthes famously catalogued in *A Lover's Discourse*. The cabinet maker 'simply fell in love with wood', the poet was 'seduced by the sound of words', the future chemist knew 'from the first moment' that the laboratory was where she belonged (Barthes, 1978).

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In my current place of employment, a small conservatory for classical music in Berlin called the Barenboim-Said Akademie, I regularly ask my students to write a short autobiography in which they tell me the story of how they chose their instrument. The question is by no means idle: I really want to know. It's not obvious to me, for example, why one would choose the viola instead of the violin, or the French horn instead of the trumpet. Or, for that matter, why one would choose to pursue a career in classical music in the first place, given the demands, the sacrifices, the ruthless competition, the lack of any guarantees of security. Again and again, the students speak in terms of love. 'I can't explain it. I just loved the sound of the French horn.'

Despite the word's contemporary degradation – through over-use and commercialization (e.g. "Love: It's what makes a Subaru a Subaru.") – I think that we, as teachers, should take such amorous declarations seriously. They point toward something essential about the person who utters them, and hence offer clues as to how we, as teachers, might best address that essence and "lead it forth" (L. *educere*) in an educational process. To the degree that such processes are really about self-discovery, we might remember the words of French novelist Arsène Houssaye: "Tell me what you love and I will tell you who you are." Love is, after all, a total response, a response of the whole person. As I will try to explain in what follows, this is where I see an indissoluble connection to the concepts of presence and embodiment – key concepts for performative teaching and learning.

2 An experiment

In a course I designed and taught recently, called *Introduction to the Creative Process*, my students and I read and discussed a small selection of literary odes (by John Keats, Pablo Neruda, C. Dale Young and Max Mendelsohn). As a homework assignment, then, I asked the students each to write an ode to their instrument – not to the instrument in general, but to their specific instrument, the one they carry with them and practice and perform with every day.

This was a challenging task. The students at the Barenboim-Said Akademie do not generally think of themselves as creative writers, and English is generally not their first language – nor in many cases even their second or third. Hence we would say the 'linguistic resources' at their disposal were quite limited, to say nothing of their self-confidence. The results of this assignment, however, were rather remarkable. Here is what a young violinist from Iran wrote:

Ode to My Violin

My dear violin!
Beautiful, shaped wood
Made from a tree far away…

You give new color
Not only to me
But also to the whole world
The smell of your wood
Brings me to another world
And I feel your brightness
While playing you

Despite our sad moments together
Our misunderstandings
And sometimes my anger towards you
We‘ve had wonderful time together
I try to be always kind to you
As you’re always to me

My life was changed
Because of you
You brought me a new world
Full of love and entertainment
Who knew that we would find each other
And make music with our hearts

Let me just note that the line “And make music with our hearts” possesses a simple and profound beauty on all the levels poets care about: the rhythm, the distribution of the vowel and consonant sounds, and the thought expressed. But more importantly: taken as a whole, in terms of its fundamental gesture, this is clearly a love poem addressed to the beloved.

Here’s another poem, written by a young viola player from Turkey:

Ode to My Viola

Old and woody
Loud voice but also kind, gentle
It is emotional but just like a chameleon,
It changes color as you play
A tree born in Turkey,
A sweet tree,
It brings the smell of rosin and nature wood,

> My childhood,
> My memories,
> It reminds me of all.
> It has a past that it left to me, but it has a thousand memories.

Noteworthy here is the synesthesia of the imagery: we have of course the sound of the instrument, by also the color and smell (and taste?) of the wood and of the rosin from the bow and their final translation into the zone of memory – not just personal memory, but the memories ingrained in the instrument itself. The movement is from a rich sensuous experience of the concrete object through the imagination and into an open encounter with the world beyond the limits of the lyrical self.

I could offer other examples. What strikes me about these poems is not only their remarkable success *as poems*, but the hints they give as to the *nature of the relationship* these young musicians have to the actual physical instrument they've essentially committed their lives to. If we take the poems on their own terms – and I see no reason not to – we would have to say not only that they express a relationship of *love*, but that this love is of a particular kind. We would be misreading the poems were we to imagine that the love they give voice to is some sort of rarified, denatured, disembodied 'Platonic' love à la Dante for his Beatrice. This love is entirely *embodied*: it is rooted in the body, in its sensations and desires, memories and longings. It is, in a word, erotic.

Yes, erotic. But before I try to defend to use of that scandalous word, I need to take a detour through the hotly debated question of *presence.* (On the temperature of this debate, see Coonfield & Rose, 2012). This will enable me to show how *eros*, if understood to include the full range of embodied human experiences of attraction or what I will call *sensuous affinity*, actually lies at the root of education.

3 Presence and embodiment

The classical rhetoricians advise against beginning in a polemical vein, especially where the topic is already the occasion for fierce differences of opinion, but I'm going to do so anyway here. At the very least, this will alert the reader to my 'positionality' as an educator.

I take it as axiomatic that a necessary, though perhaps not sufficient, condition of *presence* is *embodiment*. One cannot speak of 'presence' without reference to the human body, for it is, finally, the body that is present or absent from a specific place and time. Even such expressions as 'presence of mind' confirm this: we say someone has 'presence of mind' when their attention is rooted in a given situation, a situation of embodiment among specific objects, relations, contingencies and demands.

The rhetoric surrounding 'online presence', especially in its post-pandemic iterations, thus contains an obvious contradiction in terms that requires impressive (or not-so-impressive) dialectical acrobatics to overcome. The phrase 'online presence' is in fact a *catachresis*: a misuse of language. But even if one posits a Cartesian independence for the 'mind', i.e. by showing that one can be mentally present or absent regardless of the body, this argument only goes so far. To be present, for example, in a 'remote classroom', one must be physically present at least to the device that mediates this experience. As we all know, this enforces a certain constraint felt precisely on the body: one must remain in front of the camera, one must manage one's visual and sonic environment appropriately, one must adjust to the decoupling of eye-contact in conversation, etc.; and perhaps most challengingly, because largely unconscious: one must adjust to the radical reduction in the quality of visual and auditory information (pertaining to the human face, body and voice) relative to an in-person encounter, as well as to the complete loss of interpersonal touch and smell. This last may well be the most significant. There is reason to believe that such extreme truncation of sensory input – an effect of the technical process of digitization – accounts for the proverbial exhaustion one feels after an hour or two on Zoom. It's as if the human nervous system were searching and searching for the multi-sensory richness of information it normally depends upon for understanding a social interaction. But the richness is simply not there. The brain presses its nose to the glass and exhausts itself trying to smell the bread.

Granted: digital and online learning are by no means a total loss. It would be ungenerous to disregard the benefits in terms of 'inclusivity' and the access such technologies allow for individuals and communities to meet, interact and collaborate who would not otherwise have been able to do so – at least not so easily. In the world of teaching and learning, one could even speak of a 'democratization': I can attend a lecture by a renowned Harvard professor without having to enroll at Harvard. And certainly under extreme circumstances – a pandemic, a war, an ecological catastrophe – Zoom is better than nothing at all.

But what we see more and more is the wholesale replacement of embodied learning by digital learning even where no such extreme conditions exist. Initially marketed as 'supplements' to in-person learning, digital technologies have begun to push in-person learning aside entirely. Even classroom time, where it still exists, is often dominated by the use of digital technologies. I believe we need to think carefully about what exactly is being gained and what is being lost in this development.

But thinking carefully requires calling a spade a spade. A 'remote' or 'digital' classroom is really no classroom at all. It has nothing in common with the shared spatiality of an actual classroom, nor with the shared temporality of an actual class period. Far from bringing human beings together in a shared experience of presence, it divides and disperses them, and it does so in a

way that makes embodiment a problem to be overcome rather than a communicative field and a source of knowledge and pleasure. The terms 'online presence' and 'remote classroom', then, like the term 'social media', are examples of Orwellian doublespeak: *they actually mean the opposite of what they purport to mean*. They belong to the techniques of mystification, and they serve, among other interests, the purely economic interests of the powerful tech companies that own the means of production and that will apparently do or say just about anything to convince us we're missing out on life if we don't buy their products.

Let us resist this mystification by affirming that the human body is a necessary condition of the state of affairs we call *presence*. The 'mind' cannot be present on its own. By imagining the cherry blossoms in Tokyo, I am not present there; I am merely mentally absent from here. My physical presence here is in this sense 'empty'. In order for that presence to be full, to be 'fully present', my body and my mind must both be here. One might also refer to this state as 'mindfulness': the awareness – the 'mind' – is fully present, at once alert and at rest, in the body. It fills the body and roots it in the present moment of sensuous experience. It is embodied.

Speaking of 'the present moment' and of 'sensuous experience', however, reminds us that presence is not a stable, self-enclosed state. It is relational, dynamic and emergent. Certain traditions in meditation notwithstanding, we are never simply present, but always *becoming present to* the sensuous world around and within us. We are *present in* a particular body, *in* a particular place and *at* a particular time; and that particularity also often includes other particular bodies *for whom* we are present. With respect to social situations, 'presence' is thus at the same time *copresence*, in which, according to Erwing Goffman, "[P]ersons must sense that they are close enough to be perceived in whatever they are doing, including their experiencing of others, and close enough to be perceived in this sensing of being perceived" (1963, p. 17). One not only perceives the present Other along the full range of sensuous (embodied) inputs, but also perceives oneself being perceived by that Other as present.

Thus 'coming to presence' means more than bringing one's own attention fully to presence in one's own body. It also means also coming together with others in *copresence*. Even when we think of presence as a sort of personal *aura* or radiation – as in , 'She has a commanding/calming/discomfiting presence' – this only makes sense in relational terms: someone's "phenomenal body", as Erika Fischer-Lichte says, has this effect *on us* (2004). Otherwise, the auratic tree falls in the forest with nobody there to hear it.

It is this fundamentally *relational* experience of embodiment that I would like to consider in what follows.

4 Discipline

Among the many patterns of thought we seem to have inherited from the Enlightenment is a general skepticism toward the body. The mainstream of Western philosophy since the 18th Century (though perhaps taking its cue from Plato) has flowed toward disembodiment and abstraction. Friedrich Nietzsche, the implacable enemy of 'transcendence', is one of the few exceptions. More recently, this stream has moved toward the technological intervention into and transformation of the body as 'cyborg', as human-machine hybrid, or else as its own near erasure in 'virtual reality', in which human subjectivity aspires to free itself entirely of the body and to act through a digital avatar. The body is at best a 'resource' that must be either managed and optimized, or else radically transformed – which means subordinated to the regimes of productivity.

It was Michel Foucault who, inspired by Nietzsche, made the first serious attempt at mapping the genealogy of this discourse, and who showed, beginning with *Madness and Civilization* (1961) and continuing through *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality* (1976), how certain "disciplinary technologies" directed at the body have been brought to bear in a large variety of social institutions, including hospitals, prisons and schools (Foucault, 1979, p. 198). In an educational setting, the body, its urges, promptings, intuitions, experiences, desires, etc. have generally been viewed with suspicion, as a threat or disruption to the 'purely cognitive' task of learning. Students are to sit still in their desks. Emotions are to be controlled, daydreaming and fidgeting kept to an absolute minimum. In recent decades, even the sensory experience of turning the pages of a book, underlining and scrawling notes in the margins, smelling the paper and the binding and the printer's ink – all of this has been replaced with the swipe of a finger or the tapping of a stylus on a touchscreen. What sensuous experiences remain are almost entirely visual and auditory: iPads and Smartboards offer the unlimited titillation of video clips and sound clips, animated graphs and interactive apps. Again, though, the body sits still and must behave itself. As far as the school curriculum, at most a brief 'recess' is allowed in which to 'blow off steam', and once or twice a week there is a class in 'physical education', which may indeed, depending on the institutional context, encourage the embodied pleasures of structured play (such as team sports), but may also amount to a further subjugation of the body to the discipline of rules. In short, learning is to be done with the brain, not with the body and its senses, and even in schools where the arts are taught, they are often presented as a pleasant distraction from the serious business of brain-work. In higher education – colleges and universities – the body is hardly acknowledged at all.

Obviously there are exceptions. Education in the trades – masonry or carpentry, for example – is of necessity hands-on. Experiential education in all of its forms pays homage, at least

nominally, to the notion of embodiment, although only the Waldorf model places the body in any sustained and sufficiently theorized way at the center of the learning process. Of course examples abound in non-Western contexts, for example among the various Native American cultures, where the emphasis has always lain on both learning *by* doing and learning *while* doing. Fortunately, some of these techniques and approaches are finding or have already found their way into Western educational contexts; and such pedagogies as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) have produced flexible curricula that encourage learners to bring their full selves to the learning experience. But I think it's fair to say that, in general, we're continuing down the well-beaten path. "The spirit of abstraction," wrote Friedrich Schiller over 200 years ago, "consumes the flame at which the heart ought to have warmed itself and the imagination caught fire." Is it any wonder then, he asks, that despite all the achievements of the Enlightenment, "we are still barbarians?" (2009, p. 24, 33, my translation).

The irony of course is that, thanks to neuroscience, we now know the brain to be itself an organ of the body, one that is directly connected, through its complex neural networks, with every other bodily organ. In this sense, the 'mind' *is* the body, and vice versa. Cognition – even of the most abstract kind – is quite literally an organic process, and to pretend that the situation is otherwise – to pretend, for example, that learning done while sitting passively and alone in front of a computer screen is in any sense 'the same' or 'as good' as learning done with others and on the move – is to indulge in magical thinking.

Fortunately, however, a counter-tradition, reaching back through Nietzsche and in fact all the way to ancient Greece (Lutzker, 2007), has been showing signs of renewed strength in Europe and North America since at least the 1960's, and the recent developments in neuroscience alluded to above have come at an opportune time to support this trend. The result is that 'embodied' forms of learning are slowly gaining ground, particularly in language learning (Sambanis, 2008). The growth and success of the *Scenario Journal* is certainly indicative of this.

But at the same time, one must acknowledge the societal background against which these alleged gains are taking place: a radical permeation of all aspects of life by digital technologies – in other words, by machines whose primary function is to capture and monetize attention, and hence to *disembody* the consumer, to make her less and less *present* in her own body at any particular place or time, and less *copresent* with the other human beings around her. In our current economic mode, the body remains of interest only as a site of consumption: either as a kind of tube through which passes an endless stream of commodities, or as itself a raw material to be optimized in accordance with the latest influencer trends and with the aid of the consumer products they are paid to promote. Whatever resists such disciplining is shunned as a lump of recalcitrant flesh, worthy only of being scorned, hated, punished.

So the train is full of people all staring at their phones, unaware that the first snow has started to fall outside. Even the family television – once considered the death of sociability – seems quaint in an age in which everyone watches their own entertainment on their own phone with their own ear-buds. Whether a shift to embodied forms of education, education rooted in presence, can do anything to reverse, or even slow, this process of emptying-out remains to be seen. Powerful economic forces are certainly working against it. As many a small, liberal arts college in the United States and elsewhere has been forced to acknowledge, it's actually much cheaper to offer your curriculum 'remotely'. Moreover, this is what many students now want and expect, having been trained all their lives to think (of themselves) as consumers, and to scout out the best deal, the most convenient arrangement. It's just a hassle to get one's body from place to place, it's unpleasant to have to sit close to other people in a classroom and look them in the eye, to have to hear and smell them, to have to deal with them and their different opinions, to have to be present. Wouldn't it be easier just to log in at the appointed time? Or better yet: to watch a pre-recorded video at one's own convenience?

5 Emotion

For the ancient Greeks, among whom an embodied approach to education might be said to have its roots, the body was not merely the site of sense perception and action, but also of emotion. Among the emotions that dwell *in potentia* in the body are both culturally 'positive' ones – such as happiness and joy, gratitude, curiosity, etc. – and 'negative' ones – such as fear, anger, regret, disgust, etc. These labels are of course to a large extent culturally determined, and contemporary Europeans are likely to be surprised by Aristotle's proscriptions (in the *Poetics*) against pity, which he famously saw as requiring hygienic 'purgation,' along with fear, through the experience of witnessing a tragic play. We generally view pity as a positive, if at times uncomfortable, emotion. Likewise, Aristotle's praise of anger – albeit only in moderation and under specific circumstances – in the *Nicomachean Ethics* might strike us as at best ill-advised, and at worst antisocial. Similarly with pride and ambition.

The emotional zone where we disagree most strongly with the Ancients, however, is certainly the zone of desire or the erotic. At first glance, this disagreement is rather one-sided: the ancient philosophers were able and willing to approach the question of *eros* seriously, while modern philosophers have not been. For the Ancients, *eros* was a fundamental creative impulse, an indelible aspect of human life, which they represented as a god, and which some (Empedocles and others) even posited as a structuring principle of the cosmos. At the start of Plato's *Symposium*, one of the canonical philosophical works devoted to the question of *eros*, Socrates says, with his usual irony,“ [T]he subject of love is the only one I claim to understand” (p. 9). In the *Phaedrus*, the other major work on the subject in the Platonic canon, Socrates

says that "the madness of love is the greatest of heaven's blessings" (p. 36) and inseparable from the soul's migration toward truth. Modern philosophers, by contrast, have generally been happy to leave the question to the psychologists. As Roland Barthes succinctly puts it with reference to the *Symposium*, "Eros is a system. Today, however, there is no system of love" (1978, p. 211).

One consequence of this is that we tend to have a rather crude notion of the erotic. We associate it, almost exclusively, with sexual desire. For the Ancients, this was merely one, and perhaps the least important, form of desire expressed in the idea of *eros*. As the classical philologist and poet Anne Carson points out, *eros* was for the Greeks also the desire at the root of philosophy: the desire to know, a "mood of knowledge" that is "emitted by the spark that leaps in the lover's soul" (1986, p. 66). A trace of this understanding survives in what Maxine Greene, speaking of aesthetic education, calls a *yearning consciousness*: "Desire is evoked by the realization of what is not yet, expressed in the yearning toward possibility," (1984, p. 134). One could argue that this form of desire is in fact fundamental to all education, and that educational processes are essentially ways of discovering, awakening and stimulating such desires. Of course we shy away from calling this by its name, preferring instead to speak of 'intrinsic motivation'. But the effect is indelibly erotic. The passionate learner desires, reaches out for, wishes to be close to and in some sense to appropriate – what? Not just knowledge in some abstract form, but knowledge in its concrete manifestations: texts and materials, physical spaces and relations, modes of inquiry and communication. The contemporary Irish writer Brian Dillon says of his first encounters with literary theory, "I fell in love with those moments of collapse" (2017, p. 42), and in Kate Briggs' words, "I read with my body…and my body is not the same as yours" (2017, p. 107). It is no surprise, then, that Roland Barthes can speak of humanistic education in general as "falling in love" with certain texts, and indeed of the "pleasure of the text" (1987, quoted in Briggs, 2017, p. 216).

These are the testimonies of three writers. But I wonder if the same doesn't hold true for other artists and craftspeople, for scientists, for anyone who desires to do something and who learns how to do it well. Could their relation with the materials and methods of their craft be characterized by a form of erotic engagement with the world, an engagement that is infused with embodied yearning, with attraction, with pleasure, with desire?

This might be easiest to see in the case of an actual craftsman, let's say a stone-mason, whose hands know the shape of their tools, the look, feel, smell, and structural qualities of various types of stone, the properties of mortar. Assuming he was free to choose, his choice of this particular trade will be due to a felt affinity with these materials: the hammer and chisel just 'felt right' in his hands. The same can be said, I believe, for the future chemist, who feels a sensuous affinity with the atmosphere and the apparatus of the lab, the beakers and burners,

the devices of precise measurement, the crisp white lab coat with its pocket-protector. The future actor, for her part, falls in love with the physical space of the theater, the solidity of the stage beneath her feet, the smell of freshly painted flats, the texture of a costume, the heft of a prop, the feeling of her breath and of her voice resonating within her body and filling the room. It is her body that feels at home in its relation to these arrangements, and in its relation to her fellow actors and to the audience watching and listening to her. It is her body that internalizes the playwright's words and lives through them, thus bringing the character to life. If she did not feel this affinity, she would not have become an actor. And we all probably know someone who has given up a 'white collar' job precisely for the lack of such affinity, or because of a strong and ultimately irresistible affinity to something else. I simply love baking bread. I love digging in the dirt and helping things grow. I love making bicycles run smoothly. I love the feeling of pen on paper as words are formed and thoughts take shape through the syntax. I desire and want to be close to these objects, situations, processes, experiences, people.

Which is not to say, mind you, that 'white collar' jobs don't also offer erotic pleasures of a similar kind for those whose affections that way tend. Certainly it is possible to experience a sensuous affinity for fine Italian shoes and tailored suits, for the firm handshake and the steady gaze, for the clean air of the top floor, the commanding view of downtown from the corner office, and the smooth, effortless purr of the engine in a new Mercedes. These too are erotic, embodied experiences of the kind I am describing. The executive who ceases to feel any sensuous affinity for these things would do well to take early retirement and try something else.

The point, it seems to me, is that an education rooted in the body and in the experience of presence should be largely concerned with staging opportunities for learners to discover these affinities, to discover which way their affections do indeed tend. To quote Maxine Greene again, "We need to think about the creation of situations in which preferences are released, uncertainties confronted, desires given voice" (p. 123). This means, above all, staging *encounters*: bringing the learner into direct, un-mediated contact with materials, with spaces, with processes, and with each other.

6 Desire

Readers will have noticed that I gradually shifted, in the previous section, from speaking of *eros* to speaking of *sensuous affinity*. This might give the impression that my aim of 'expanding the concept of *eros*' is in reality just a trick of turning it inside-out and leaving a hole in the middle, into which sexual desire will quietly disappear. If this were the case, then I could rightly be accused of either prudery or simple naïveté. My intention is not to exclude the sexual, but to situate it within a more general concept of attraction that goes beyond the limited,

conventional signification – which, in the words of poet and translator Richard Howard, is either "coarse" or "clinical" (Barthes, 1975, p. v). Ideally, we would find a terminology that could encompass the full range of desires rooted in the body and directed at the things of this world, at the concrete and the lived. Etymologically, the term *affinity* contains the idea of approaching an edge or border (L.: *ad* "toward, to, at" + *finis* "border"), and the border in question in education is of course that of the self. Again drawing on Anne Carson, we can say that, by "reaching for an object that proves to be outside and beyond himself", the learner is "provoked to notice that self and its limits" (1986, pp. 32-33). In this way, "The self forms at the edge of desire" (p. 39). *Sensuous affinity*, then, is embodied desire directed beyond the self, a reaching, infused with imagination, that in its very transgression illuminates the boundaries. In a literal sense, then, we are talking about the process of self-discovery.

The question cannot be how best to ignore, repress or exclude sexual desire from education, but how to handle it in a way that is ethically responsible. In the best case, a teacher would find ways to redirect these desires, if and when they express themselves, toward the objects of learning, to collaborate with nature for the purposes of culture. Carson, again in *Eros the Bittersweet*, gives a useful hint with what she calls the "triangular" structure of desire itself (pp. 12). But before I turn to this, I have to try to navigate, at least provisionally, the difficult – indeed, perilous – territory of sexual desire in education. These remarks can of course be no more than tentative; doing justice to this theme would require a much more in-depth treatment than I can offer here.

Let's imagine a classroom of teenagers. There are three basic 'scenarios' in which sexual desire might enter this setting: the first involves the teacher as object of the learner's sexual desire, the second involves the learner as object of the teacher's sexual desire, and the third involves sexual desires among the learners themselves. All three, it's worth pointing out, are also clichés of popular culture, cropping up with some regularity not only in popular film and television, but also in popular fiction and music, and of course in that most popular industry of all: pornography, in which the 'hot teacher', the 'hot student' and the 'hot classmate' are all bankable motifs. The general sociological conclusion to be drawn from this is that our society has, to say the least, an ambivalent relationship with sexual desire. It's worth asking ourselves, though, why educational environments *in particular* constitute the settings for these pop-cultural fantasies.

Now let's consider the nature of erotic desire in the conventional sense of the word. Nearly everyone has had the experience at some point in their life of being attracted to another person, possibly to many other people, and with varying degrees of intensity and emotional valence. Such attractions, which, though largely physiological and hence evolutionary, are also culturally and individually determined, play a role in everything from how we select partners

and friends to how well or ill at ease we feel in casual social settings. Whether, for example, I find another person attractive in this physical sense will depend not only upon such demographic factors as their age, apparent gender and ethnicity, but also on much more individual factors of their embodiment, such as bodily shape, smell, posture and movement, facial expression, and vocal quality. And even all of this is to say nothing of the entire personal dimension of my own family background, memories, fantasies, and of cultural influences via the books I've read, films I've seen, and so on. Admittedly, such attractions can be rather unpredictable in their development: regardless of how attractive another person may be at first, that attraction will most certainly change as we get to know that person better. But the point is that the experience of embodied – that is to say, erotic – attraction to another person is, if not universal, then nearly so. This is part of human life, it is part of being human. It is therefore also part of education, and, I would argue, we ignore it at our peril.

The reader may be experiencing some discomfort at this point. The writer is as well. Doubtless this tells us something about just how conflicted our cultural understanding of desire turns out to be. So let me hasten to make one thing clear – or as clear as I can. We now know, I hope, that people in positions of power – especially teachers, for reasons I will explore in a moment – must proceed with integrity, extreme caution, and a robust capacity for self-scrutiny when it comes to their own sexual attractions and desires. I take that as a given. Too much damage has been done for too long by people who mistake their desires for a mandate, and in seeking to gratify themselves disregard the wellbeing of others, treating them not as ends-in-themselves but as means-to-an-end. That is simply immoral. Sexual desire by itself is no crime, and in fact, it is in a sense quite natural. What matters is the behavior it leads to, especially for people in positions of power, such as teachers. But precisely because such desires are taboo, they are rarely addressed honestly in terms of professional best practice. Most institutions merely have a policy that more or less explicitly forbids consensual 'romantic' relationships between faculty/staff and students. It is unclear how effective such policies are. But one thing is clear: teachers who have the misfortune of finding themselves sexually attracted to their students are in a dangerous position indeed, and usually without any clear direction in which to turn for guidance or help. In fact, the strength of the social taboo may make them afraid to avail themselves even of such help as may exist. They are truly living under the sword of Damocles, and the sooner they can step away the better.

But what about the sexual desires of the students? Depending upon their age, the sexual dimension of life could play a very significant role in their relations to each other and the world. How is a teacher to handle these desires, especially when directed at the teacher herself? As noted above, popular culture is, alas, full of precisely such images, to the point that one may rightly speak of a cultural commonplace. Any number films, television series,

commercials and popular songs make use of this cliché, either centrally or incidentally, and, as mentioned above, an entire sub-genre of pornography is explicitly based on it. We would have to acknowledge that a young person's imagination is given plenty of encouragement in this direction by the various industries that peddle such wares, and a critical analysis of them would most certainly reveal something interesting – and perhaps troubling – about our cultural unconscious. But the material causes of the cliché are easy to recognize: the teacher is in fact *on display* in the classroom. The students notice, and observe at leisure, the teacher's body, the way it is dressed, the way it moves, the way it sounds and smells. It would be no exaggeration to say that, after those of the student's own parents or caregivers, the teacher's body is the single most consistently present adult body in a young person's life. No wonder, then, if under certain circumstances that body becomes erotically 'cathected', in Freud's terminology. It becomes an object of desire, a surface upon which all manner of libidinal content gets projected and 'worked out'. How is the teacher to respond?

I don't believe that ignoring or actively repressing these desires through shaming or other forms of humiliation is the answer. Ideally, as I have said, one should find ways to both honor and redirect them ethically – in the service of learning. But how is this to be imagined, to say nothing of implemented? I am aware of no clear answers. And yet one thing is certain: how such desires are handled can have profound and lasting effects on the learner, whether that learner is a budding teenager, a college or graduate student, or an adult returning to education after a long hiatus In the words of the American poet Richard Wilbur, "Love calls us to the things of this world" (1988, p. 233), and if the call is ignored, mocked or condemned, how will the world be reached?

7 Agricultural products

If one pays any attention at all to the way teachers and teaching are 'staged' in the popular imagination, at least in North America, one can't help but notice certain patterns, or rather, certain recurring bits of *mis-en-scéne* that function metonymically for the entire educational drama. One of these is of course the chalkboard, often greenish in color and filled with scrawl on the order of '$a^2 + b^2 = c^2$' or 'Irony' or 'What were the three main causes of the Civil War?' Another is the teacher's hideous institutional desk. Somewhere on that desk is a cup of pens and pencils, a mug of stale coffee, a stack of papers to be graded or handed back, and, placed more likely than not in the desk's upper left-hand corner from the sitter's point of view: a smallish, roundish, reddish agricultural product. That's correct: an apple.

I don't know if it is still (or indeed, ever was) conventional in North America or elsewhere for students to give their teacher an apple – presumably in the autumn, when the school year begins, since this is also apple season. In my thirty years of teaching, I've never once been

given an apple by a student, although I've received homemade cookies on several occasions, and once was presented with a pint glass bearing a corporate logo (the corporation in question being the synthesizer manufacturer Moog, where my student had recently landed a good job). Nevertheless, whether understood as a harmless sort of bribe or as a genuine gesture of appreciation, the apple remains an iconic, perhaps nostalgic, part of the good teacher's accoutrement. (And it is important to note that the apple carries a certain moral valence: it signifies that the teacher is indeed 'good', or at least well-liked by her students. If the drama requires that the teacher be 'bad', then the apple will be conspicuously absent.)

The apple, however, has a long and interesting history in European culture. One could point to its frequent appearance as the 'forbidden fruit' of the biblical Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, as well to its role in the beauty contest between the goddesses Hera, Athena and Aphrodite, which the Trojan prince Paris decided in favor of the latter, albeit with unfortunate consequences for just about everybody.

Another notable apple appears in a fragment by the poet Sappho, which Anne Carson (back to Anne Carson) analyzes in depth in *Eros the Bittersweet*. In Carson's translation, the poem reads:

> As a sweet apple turns red on a high branch,
> high on the highest branch and the apple pickers forgot–
> well, no they didn't forget – were unable to reach…
>
> (Sappho, fragment 105a, quoted in Carson, 1986, p. 26)

"The poem is incomplete, perfectly," writes Carson with her usual talent for paradox. It is a poem about desire, about reaching for the desired object – the sweet apple on the highest branch –, "but completion is not achieved – grammatical or erotic. Desiring hands close on empty air in the final infinitive, while the apple of their eye dangles perpetually inviolate two lines above" (p. 27).

These three moments in the European tradition – the 'Judgement of Paris', the biblical story of 'man's first disobedience' and Sappho's suspended simile (for a young bride?) in fragment 105a – place the apple at a dense point of intersection, where the desire/love for sensuous beauty meets the desire/love for knowledge. In a sense, they are revealed in the image of the apple to be one and the same desire. The apple could be said to function, then, as a symbol for *eros* itself.

Of course it would be a stretch to claim that invoking this symbolism is the *intention* behind the gift of the apple, but is in fact what the gift itself *means*, regardless of whether the student/giver or the teacher/recipient is aware of it. In other words: hidden within this

conventional (and perhaps now largely mythical) gesture is a profound insight into the importance of desire – of sensuous affinity – in education.

But the Sappho fragment has more to teach us. The object of desire (the apple) and the reaching hands of the pickers, now departed, are not the only actors in this drama. There is also the poet herself, who, like Keats contemplating the figures on the Grecian urn, sees (or imagines) the dynamic tableau before her. In fact, then, we find three 'positions' inscribed here: the apple, the pickers – close but not quite close enough –, and the poet. This three-part structure could be imagined as a set of vectors forming a triangle; and Carson does just this in her analysis of the more famous fragment 31, which she calls "one of the best-known love poems in our tradition":

> He seems to me equal to gods that man
> who opposite you
> sits and listens close
> to your sweet speaking
>
> and lovely laughing – oh it
> puts the heart in my chest on wings […]
>
> (Sappho, fragment 31, quoted in Carson, 1986, pp. 12-13)

Here the poet enters the drama more directly, as one who desires, while the apple has become the beloved "you". The role of the departed apple pickers is played here by a man, who is not only present, but whom the poet imagines as "equal to the gods" by virtue of his blessed proximity to the beloved. He "sits and listens close / to your sweet speaking // and lovely laughing". Far from provoking jealously in the poet, however, the man's presence in this "geometrical figure" (p. 13) "puts the heart in my chest on wings." His presence is, as Carson writes, "a cognitive and intentional necessity":

> [T]he ruse of the triangle is not a trivial mental maneuver. We see in it the radical constitution of desire. For […] its activation calls for three structural components – lover, beloved and that which comes between them. They are three points of transformation on a circuit of possible relationship, electrified by desire so that they touch not touching. Conjoined they are held apart. The third component plays a paradoxical role for it both connects and separates, marking that two are not one, irradiating the absence whose presence is demanded by eros. When the circuit points connect, perception leaps. And something becomes visible, on the triangular path where volts are moving, that would not be visible without the three-part structure. The difference between what is and what could be becomes visible. (pp. 16-17)

Later in the book, Carson suggests a strong "resemblance" between the desire experienced in love and the desire to know, saying that "They are not like anything else, but they are like each other," and that "It has been an endeavor of philosophy from the time of Sokrates to understand the nature of this resemblance" (p. 70).

What I'd like to suggest now is by way of hypothesis. If we were to map Carson's geometrical figure onto the educational setting, what would the *dramatis personae* look like? The 'beloved' might be, let's say, knowledge (or if you prefer: the subject or subject matter); the man who "sits and listens close" is the teacher – closer to the 'beloved', attentive, also desiring, but not in possession; and the lyric 'I' of the poem is the student, who sees and hears both, and whose own desire is thereby not only awakened ("put […] on wings") but given a specific direction.

Obviously, the student's desire cannot be for the teacher, nor the teacher's for the student – either would leave out 'the beloved' and short-circuit the triangulation and hence the movement toward the things of this world, toward knowledge. But there must be desire, and it falls upon the teacher to awaken it – by example, i.e. by embodying in herself and, equally important, *performing* the attentive, listening quality of her own desire for the 'beloved', which is of course another name for wisdom.

8 Inconclusion

None of the above is to be taken as conclusive, nor even as an 'argument' in the academic sense, but rather as an essay or 'attempt' to come to terms with one of the premises of performative teaching and learning: the ineluctable presence of the sensuous/somatic body. This is easier said in theory than done in practice. Performative pedagogy is often sold as a kind of happy learning, in which only positive emotions and experiences are to be expected. But anyone who has worked with performance knows that it is not all fun and games. Far from it: performance is *endangered presence*, and it can and often does call forth aspects of the self which we may find difficult or even threatening, emotions such as fear, anger, sadness, and so on. As I have written elsewhere, if we really mean what we say about 'engaging the entire human being' in the process of learning, then we have to be prepared to honor these experiences as well (Crutchfield, 2015). And by 'honor' I do not mean 'control' or even simply 'contain'. I mean something more like an embrace.

What holds true for 'negative' emotions pertains also to the body's desires – its sensuous affinities – which may be pleasurable in themselves, but which are often viewed as transgressive, as volatile and dangerous, as somehow 'primitive' and operating in opposition to the 'higher aims' of education. As a consequence, they often – and in the case of sexual desire, almost always – lie under a strong social taboo. But sensuous affinity – *eros* – is not

only an indelible aspect of embodiment, of human being; as I have tried to suggest here, it also plays an essential role in learning. This by no means answers the vexed question of sexual desire in the context of education, but my hope is that it marks out a territory for serious – and probably necessary – investigation and discussion.

Let me close by returning to where I started, which was also the original impetus for the thoughts explored in this essay. Here is another poem from my *Introduction to the Creative Process* class, the voice of another young learner trying to give aesthetic expression to his own sensuous affinity – a desire suffused with imagination – for the things of this world:

Ode To My Violin

Lady of stringed instruments
Her graceful and charming construction
And her tender voice –
She carries in her voice all the secrets in the world
The wood of her body came from dark forests
And carries memories of a tree from decades or centuries ago,
Carrying the scent of the forest,
The secrets of all the birds that landed on the tree.
All that passed by were deer and tigers,
Tales of the woodcutter and the violin maker,
Feelings of a Phoenician singer:
She sings to her absent, distant lover
On the other side of the Mediterranean
She urges the sea to carry the message to him.

There are four visible strings in each violin
But there are other strings that you cannot see,
emitting tones that no one can hear,
But the soul feels them,
The notes containing the secret of the creation of the universe,
The moment of the big bang,
The rhythm of galaxies and stars,
Superstrings,
Moving through parallel universes

Paradise would not be without a violin.
In heaven, angels play the violin,
Art muses are all around
sing and dance to the artful sound.

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